

MEMORANDUM

TO: The SAB Committee on Valuing the Protection of Ecological Systems and Services

FROM: Al McGartland, Ph.D.
Director, National Center for Environmental Economics
on behalf of the Ecological Benefits Assessment workgroup

DATE: 3 October 2003

RE: Background and charge questions for SAB consultation on EPA's Ecological Benefits Assessment Strategic Plan

Background

The Ecological Benefits Assessment Strategic Plan is being developed to identify, prioritize, and coordinate the efforts needed to improve ecological benefits assessment at EPA. The plan was conceived in June 2002 during work planning discussions among a group of EPA managers on current and future efforts regarding ecological benefits assessment at the Agency.

In September 2002, ICF Consulting was contracted to assist in the creation of the plan. As part of the information gathering phase of the process, ICF reviewed a wide range of information sources pertaining to the valuation of ecosystem services. These sources are included as an appendix to the plan. Between November 2002 and April 2003, 12 informational meetings were held to determine the extent to which ecological benefits are quantified and valued to support environmental decision-making at EPA and beyond. Both ecologists and economists within EPA and from other Federal agencies were invited to the informational meetings (including U.S. ACE, FWS, USGS, BLM, NPS, NOAA, and USFS). In all, 46 EPA staff and 27 staff from other agencies were interviewed: 54 ecologists and 19 economists. Meeting participants discussed the current state of the practice of ecological benefits assessment at their respective agencies and limitations in the knowledge base (i.e., data, methods, models). To supplement the anecdotal assessments provided at these informational meetings, a follow-up survey was distributed to nearly 300 EPA scientists. Over the course of two months, 86 surveys were completed and returned. The survey asked a series of structured questions regarding the known or suspected impacts of a range of environmental stressors on a range of ecological endpoints, and on the current "state of the science" on the relationships between those stressors and endpoints.

In December 2002 and April 2003 briefings were held to update interested EPA staff and managers on the progress of the strategic planning process. Also, in December 2002, the Assistant and Associate Administrators of several key EPA offices involved in the project met to discuss the progress to date and to encourage more coordination between the participating offices. As a result of that meeting, a memorandum was sent by the heads of the offices leading the planning process to the heads of all other EPA offices alerting them to the existence of this effort and asking for the cooperation of their staff.

The plan is being developed by two workgroups: a management-level steering committee and a staff-level editors group. Both groups include members from several EPA offices, and both have been meeting regularly since April 2003. Participating offices include Office of Policy, Economics, and Innovation, Office of Research and Development, Office of Water, Office of Air and Radiation, Office of Prevention, Pesticides and Toxic Substances, and Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response.

Although the material has not undergone a formal Agency review, both the steering committee and editors

group have reviewed the attached draft material and are comfortable submitting the material in order to seek SAB feedback that will help EPA develop the plan. ~~Both the steering committee and editors group have reviewed the attached draft material and, while the material has not undergone internal review, are comfortable submitting the material in order to seek feedback that will help EPA develop the plan.~~

The plan will be subject to broad inter-agency review, as well as consultation and review by the Science Advisory Board, Committee on Valuing the Protection of Ecological Systems and Services. EPA expects to complete the plan in early 2004.

List of attached material

- Ecological Benefits Assessment Strategic Plan, SAB Review Draft, Sections 1 to 3 and 6
- Appendix B: Literature and Information Resources for Ecological Benefits Assessment

Charge questions for the Committee

This draft material is being submitted to the Science Advisory Board in order to seek feedback to aid in the development of the plan. As you review the draft materials noted above and prepare your reactions, we ask you to consider the following questions:

- 1. Are the goals and objectives in Section 1.1 appropriate and clearly stated? If not, do you have suggestions for improvement?*
- 2. Section 2.2 discusses past EPA-related efforts to improve the assessment of ecological benefits. Are you aware of any other past efforts that should be mentioned in this Section? Please provide references if possible.*
- 3. Is the discussion of the current state of the practice in ecological risk assessment and economic valuation at EPA in Section 3 clear? Based on past experience you may have had with EPA, does this discussion accurately reflect the state of the practice at the Agency? Do you agree that the integrated process described in Section 3 is one that the Agency should strive to implement? If not, please suggest alternative processes.*
- 4. Appendix B provides a list of information resources related to the economic valuation of ecosystem services. Are you aware of other items that should be included in this appendix?*
- 5. Are you aware of ongoing activities which may be of use to EPA as it develops the Plan?*
- 6. What are your initial thoughts regarding the major knowledge gaps with regard to ecological benefits assessment at EPA?*
- 7. Based on your past experience with EPA, which, if any, communication and process barriers do you feel impact the Agency's ability to value ecological benefits?*